The history of Serbia's youth protests illustrates the importance of learning and adaptation in protest tactics

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In the wake of the Arab Spring, it is clear that protest movements can be a viable means to affect change on a national level. In this light, **Olena Nikolayenko** *looks at the development of the Serbian youth protest movement, Otpor, from its antecedents in the early 1990s to its role in the electoral defeat of the President of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. She writes that the protest movement owes much of its success to its ability to learn from its own experiences and those of protest movements in other countries.*

Nearly 15 years ago, the role of the youth movement *Otpor* (Resistance in Serbian) in bringing down the incumbent president Slobodan Milosevic made headlines worldwide. The social movement formed by a small group of students from the University of Belgrade in October 1998 drew thousands of youngsters into nonviolent resistance to the regime. According to some estimates, as many as 70,000 people had joined the movement by the time of the 2000 federal elections. Otpor skillfully campaigned against the incumbent president, plastering stickers and spraypainting graffiti with the provocative slogan *Gotov Je!* (He's Finished). Furthermore, civic activists organized a massive get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaign to boost youth voter turnout. An extraordinary 86 percent of 18-29 year olds participated in the 2000 elections. Most first-time voters cast a ballot against Milosevic, contributing to his electoral defeat.

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What is often neglected in media accounts of Otpor's success is that Serbian students had protested against the incumbent president for nearly a decade prior to his downfall. One of the first mass protests against the incumbent government involving thousands of students was held in March 1991, three months after Milosevic's election as the President of Serbia. In the summer of 1992, students occupied university buildings and again demanded political change, rallying under the slogan "Enough! We Want to Live Now." Another large-scale protest campaign was launched in response to vote rigging during the 1996 municipal elections. For almost four months, students participated in daily marches, pressing for the official recognition of the opposition's electoral victories and denouncing heavy-handed state interference in university affairs. This extensive protest experience provided youth activists with advanced understanding of what might work or not work in nonviolent struggle against the regime.

Participants in the 1996-97 student protests played a vital role in establishing Otpor and developing the movement's tactics. One of the lessons that youth activists learned was that the social movement should recruit non-students and mobilize different segments of the population throughout the country. Another ingredient of Otpor's success influenced by previous protest campaigns was the culture of resistance. While the opposition political parties traditionally held public rallies with a string of speeches by seasoned politicians, the youth movement appealed to the young generation by promoting the culture of resistance and using humour as a weapon against the incumbent government. In particular, the image of the clenched fist became a well-known symbol of the social movement. Otpor member Ivan Marovic recalled that branding was an important component of the movement's strategy. "We wanted people to join us and live resistance so we promoted revolution like a fashion line. We had Otpor T-shirts, mugs, and umbrellas. It was a lifestyle promotion," Marovic said during an interview in December 2007.

The cross-national diffusion of ideas also influenced the movement's strategizing. Gene Sharp's book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* supplied a systematic way of thinking about nonviolent resistance. By the same token, Serbian civic activists examined the Slovak experience of organizing a GOTV campaign. As in Slovakia, a series of rock concerts was held in small towns and cities across the country to boost voter turnout and in particular spur young voters to action. The ticking clock seen on the campaign's posters sent a message that it was time to act on election day.

Otpor's success provided an inspiration for youth activists around the globe. A number of newly formed youth movements adopted Otpor's tactics to push for political change. The effectiveness of these youth movements, however, depended to a large extent upon their ability to draw upon home-grown protest experience. For example, Ukrainian youth who participated in protest events organized by the Ukraine without Kuchma Movement in December 2000 – March 2001 drew upon their personal experience to develop more effective protest tactics during the 2004 presidential elections. Among leaders of the Ukrainian youth movement Pora (It's Time) were veterans of the 1990 student hunger strike who challenged the communist regime in October 1990. Similarly, the April 6 Youth Movement that effectively mobilized citizens against the regime during the so-called Arab Spring built upon the record of previous protest campaigns in the country. One of the movement's founders, for example, was an active member of the Kefaya Movement formed in 2004 to demand dramatic social change.

The take-home message from these success stories is that learning by doing is critical to the development of effective protest tactics. The Internet has significantly eased the cross-national diffusion of ideas, but youth activists need to adjust a universal toolkit of protest tactics to the local context to make it work and learn from their small victories or temporary losses to bring about enduring changes in the political system.

Readers may be interested in the full version of this paper: Nikolayenko, Olena. "Origins of the movement's strategy: The case of the Serbian youth movement Otpor." *International Political Science Review 34.2 (2013): 140-158.*

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